

Magazine
R95

Future imperfect

It is widely known that our closest relatives, the great apes, which hold some of the potentially richest genetic insights into our own evolution, are under threat in their natural environments. But a new assessment of our only Asian cousin, the orangutan, by the Worldwide Fund for Nature suggests numbers have declined by 90 per cent over the past century and that extinction in the wild may occur within the next generation or two. Recent estimates suggest the population may comprise little more than 30,000 individuals.

Orangutans, like most of the other apes, are found across a relatively local range but have big demands. Orangutans are found only in Sumatra and Borneo where they live in lowland rainforests and rarely come down to the ground. With a body weight of up to 90kg, they are dependent on a dense network of mature, mixed tree species for their diet of fruit, leaves and insects.

Unfortunately, dense mature, lowland rainforest is the prime target for human logging and agricultural development and their habitat has declined at an alarming rate. Uncontrolled fires to clear land for development present a grave threat. WWF Indonesia estimates that nearly two million hectares of land were burnt in the country in 1997, and that thousands of fires occurred in southern Sumatra. Although 160 companies were accused of involvement in the fires, only 46 were investigated fully and only a handful faced prosecution.

Major conservation efforts have been launched by the WWF and other bodies, in partnership with governments and other local organisations. Action plans have been developed in an effort to conserve habitat and resources for the apes, along with all the other species that would benefit from such actions, but until the economics of



Losing it: An adult orangutan and offspring face an increasingly bleak future in their natural environment as estimates suggest their numbers are falling dramatically according to the WWF. (Photograph: Oxford Scientific Films.)

logging and agricultural development and the economics of maintaining biodiversity can

be brought more in kilter, the future for this species in particular looks bleak.